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FIVE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS THAT CAN IMPACT A CLIENT-  
SOCIAL WORKER RELATIONSHIP DURING REUNIFICATION

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Desiree Camielle Alfaro

June 2020

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June 2020

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## ABSTRACT

This research project examined the client-social worker relationship to examine whether five factors related to engagement positively or negatively affected family reunification. Qualitative data were gathered during face-to-face interviews with seven parent partners who worked in the field of child welfare and witnessed daily interactions between social workers and their clientele. This third-party perspective comes from assisting clients with information, guidance, and support during the reunification process. The interviews were transcribed and coded using directed content analysis to confirm whether the five dimensions of engagement were present in their child welfare cases. The resulting qualitative data suggest that all five dimensions of engagement were important and that absence of these core features had a direct impact on a client's ability to successfully reunify. Although all five dimensions were present, trust and transparency were the most common and appeared to have the strongest influence on the relationship. These findings add to the existing literature regarding the client-social worker relationship by highlighting the role of the five dimensions of engagement for families with successful reunification and rehabilitative case plans.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

Chapter One describes the focus of the present research and provides a comprehensive outline of the study. The present study examined the client-social worker relationship in the context of child welfare cases. Specifically, the study assessed the impact of several engagement factors on the case outcome or the client's ability to reunify with their children. The first chapter provides justification for utilizing a post-positivist paradigm, followed by a review of the relevant literature. Additionally, Chapter One includes a theoretical orientation to the topic and closes the chapter with contributions to macro and micro social work practices.

#### Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. Are there engagement dimensions within the client-social worker relationship that have positive or negative influences on family reunification?
2. Do these dimensions include a working relationship, trust, receptivity, investment, and expectancy, as identified by Yatchmenoff (2005)?

## Research Focus

The present research addressed the perceived relationship between social workers and clients during family reunification cases utilizing a third-party perspective. The researcher assessed a theoretical framework previously described by Yatchmenoff (2005). The framework includes five dimensions related to engagement: working relationship, trust, receptivity, investment, and expectancy. Participant perceptions were assessed to determine whether these dimensions influenced family reunification case outcomes.

## Research Hypothesis

The researcher hypothesized that a perceived positive client-worker relationship would influence the reunification case outcome. The associated null hypothesis is that there would be no relationship between perceived positive social worker relationship and reunification. The data collection and analysis process was used to address this prediction.

## Research Preview

The present research was conducted in Southern California. The participants provided qualitative data by answering a series of questions about clients they had served. The participants were former clients, referred to as “parent partners,” who were hired by the agency to serve as mentors to current Child Welfare System (CWS) parents. Parent partners serve as support to clients

throughout the reunification process. The present work utilized these individuals' experience as employees within the confidential agency to assess the effect of the engagement factors. All of the participants worked closely with the social worker and the agency's clients simultaneously. Thus, participants were able to provide the researcher with an in-depth, third-party perspective regarding parents' abilities to reunify. The parent partner's job description and role within the research project are outlined in the implementation chapter below.

#### Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

The present work used a post-positivist paradigm (Morris, 2014). In this paradigm, questions are developed that are targeted to capture the participant's human experience. The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using keywords, known as coding, to detect patterns in the responses. In the present study, the researcher found both negative and positive patterns of response related to the different engagement dimensions. The objective reality of the data was upheld by reducing the influence of the researcher's personal biases, revealing the true third-party perception of the association between client-social worker relationship and reunification. The post-positivist paradigm procedure provided a method for transparent examination of the patterns in participants' responses, allowing for an objective third-party perspective.

The questions the researcher provided to participants were open-ended. As reported by Morris (2014), a post-positivist approach allows researchers to

assess subjects' human experience utilizing open-ended questions to capture the human experience and record it in a narrative journal completed during the interviews.

The researcher designed the questions to be descriptive, structural, and to help identify patterns. The questions were verified by both the researcher and the participants' understanding of the topic. The researcher also contrasted the positive or negative responses that participants gave. Although the participants provided a third-party perspective, their personal experience also influenced their perceptions during this study. Therefore, gathering information about participants' personal experience improved interpretation of their responses.

The qualitative data were gathered and organized for presentation in a narrative form. The researcher outlined the regularities among answers and whether the responses were positive or negative. The researcher did not assume there were any connections between responses prior to analysis, but differences among answers were expected due to different observations and levels of involvement within the agency among participants.

### Literature Review

There are a number of reports noting the benefits of a positive client-social worker relationship. However, the present study builds on this work by providing a third-party perspective on the client-social worker relationship. This section

includes a description of the five dimensions that were examined and provides support for the relevant factors and theoretical framework.

### Prevalence and Importance of Reunification

The Center for Social Services Research (Brooks, 1999) examined the child welfare system's historical challenges and developed a curriculum for social work education. At the time, California had 500,000 children in care, with one in every five children at risk of entering care. Brooks (1999) assessed caseload size/flow and influences on those outcomes. In that study, caseload sizes were a measurement of child welfare case volume that could be used to detect trends. The study defined successful family reunifications as cases that exited the foster care system, whereas case entries were children or adolescents who were entering the foster care system. Naturally, caseload growth is dependent upon the number of admissions (children coming into foster care) and reunifications (children returning home), which is called caseload flow. At the time, the average caseload size was in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. This suggests that the child welfare system would gain 37,600 cases each year, as there were more entries (children coming into foster care) than exits (family reunifications). According to Brooks (1999), discharge outcomes have continued to be low, while entries have been high. These data reiterate a growing problem: increased entries into the foster care system coupled with premature exits or a failure to reunify.

Brooks (1999) projected that reunification would decrease and caseload size/flow would steadily rise based on the predicted number of new entries. This

prediction was accurate, as California has seen an ongoing decrease in reunifications. From January 2009 to December 2009, 17,931 cases exited the child welfare system, whereas from January 2013 to December 2013 only 15,160 cases exited. These numbers continue to decrease year after year. The most recent data, from 2019, reflect a steady decline. From January 2019 to December 2019, 13,016 cases successfully reunified, and an unknown number of these reunifications re-entered care. These data indicate a 4,915 case decrease in reunification compared to 2010 (CCWIP, 2020). These trends are incredibly significant and do not reflect those families who re-entered care after reunification, in which case there may be an even fewer cases that remained rehabilitated. This topic is relevant to the present research project, as it addressed factors that may have influenced this steady decline in exited or reunified cases and, in turn, increased caseloads, burnout rates, and many other negative outcomes described in the child welfare data (Fishman, Huynh, Mezhinsky, & Pai, 2019).

An increased number of cases entering the child welfare system could remain with the agency and become a part of its caseload. Similarly, this decline in exits and reunifications could also increase the number of children who are in care and emancipate each year, though these numbers fluctuate quarterly and annually (CCWIP, 2020). Identifying strategies to increase the success rate for family reunification is crucial, which requires identification of the factors that influence reunification likelihood. This study may help social workers pinpoint

challenges that affect their clients' case outcomes, allowing child welfare social workers to consider these key components throughout a reunification case.

### Studies Focused on Relational Factors

The client-worker relationship can be defined in many way, depending on whether a worker, a client, or third party has provided the perspective. According to Proctor (1982), the literature has consistently found that the client-worker relationship is vital to a client's treatment process, suggesting that it is "the soul, keystone, chief tool, if not the dynamic force, and the basic means of social work intervention" (p. 430). However, many professionals have argued that the relationship between a social worker and a client, while desirable, was not a necessary component of the treatment process. These professionals compared the client-social worker relationship to dynamic practices seen in medicine or law. For example, it is desirable to have a positive relationship with your doctor, but it is not necessary to receive treatment or services. As an industry social work has evolved regarding the need for positive relationships between clients and social workers.

A newer study (Jedwab, Chatterjee, & Shaw, 2018) highlighted the benefits of a client's relationship with their social worker. The case study used data gathered, from caseworkers who had direct client exposure or experience working with clients relationally. All 284 caseworkers agreed that the relationship with their clients was highly valued. The findings suggested that the relationship between social workers and their clients could determine the course of the

reunification process in conjunction with supportive services. The study also found that the nuclear family's willingness to address the initial reason for removal and the ability to keep the child safe were also factors that influenced reunification.

The caseworkers' perspective from Jedwab et al. (2018) provides an updated measurement of the climate within the child welfare system. Proctor (1982) identified the client-social work relationship as the "soul" in the '80s, and Jedwab et al. (2018) found that the relationship was, in fact, an influential component of a successful reunification outcome. The new research reiterated, decades later, that the client-social worker relationship continues to play a vital role in the rehabilitation process and is not just a desirable aspect of the treatment plan (Jedwab et al., 2018). These findings inspired the present research examining additional valued characteristics.

#### Studies Focused on Relational Characteristics

The literature has addressed the importance of a successful reunification outcome and its impact on the child welfare system. Proctor (1982) argued that the client-social worker relationship was the "chief-tool" needed to intervene and produce successful outcomes. This was recently confirmed by a large group of social workers who noted that the relationship is a key factor in the success of a client's case (Jedwab et al., 2018). Farrah (2012) further addressed the complexities of the social worker-client relationship. The findings from that research suggest that the relationship is the "heart" of the case and that the



relationship could be of “major detriment” to the client's success and treatment-plan if it were damaged. Farrah’s findings were shockingly similar to those found in previous research studies (e.g., Proctor, 1982).

These findings confirm that the client and the social worker’s relationship remains at the center of a treatment plan and that it is a complex aspect of the field of social work. According to Farrah (2012), the complexity of a client's social worker relationship goes beyond the primary client. The social worker collaborates with child welfare dependency courts, community resources, service providers, and organizations. In addition to all of these entities, the social worker must also maintain a relationship with his or her client. The social worker is obligated to serve all of these entities simultaneously. This dual relationship can be a challenge for many social workers to uphold. Farrah’s (2012) findings suggested that social workers are often faced with frequent ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas included upholding accurate documentation, having open and honest communication with clients, working alone without knowledge or consultation, and maintaining their practice within the code of ethics.

Other studies have addressed additional dimensions relevant for outcomes in social work. Alexander and Charles (2009) found that reciprocity between clients and social workers was an important characteristic. Furthermore, Marc, Dimeny, and Bacter (2019) found that the social worker’s professional and personal life balance influenced their ability to practice, along with his or her expert knowledge within the field. In other words, being well-educated and

experienced was viewed as a desirable. A worker's personal and professional obligations also played a role in his or her level of investment. It was highly desirable for a social worker to be able to effectively balance personal and professional aspects of his or her life. Bagdoniene and Jakstaite (2009) found that developing a stable foundation of trust was another desirable characteristic for a professional relationship. A high level of trust within the client-social worker relationship was associated with case and rehabilitative success (Marc et al., 2019). To build on this work, the present research assessed these dimensions from a current, third-party perspective and also examined the relational factors affecting a client's re-entry or recidivism rate.

#### Relational Re-Entry Factors

Even with successful family reunification, child welfare families remain at risk for re-entry and struggle to maintain a healthy environment for their child (or children). The goal of this research study was to determine whether case outcomes were positively or negatively influenced by five dimensions related to engagement (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Additionally, the researcher examined whether the participant's case remained closed and if the relationship between the social worker and client played a role in this outcome.

The literature has highlighted several factors that may be associated with re-entry or recidivism. However, this avenue of research should be further explored to consider other systematic reasons behind failed reunification. Stephens et al. (2015) interviewed six child welfare parents regarding their

experiences after their case closed to explore obstacles they faced during the reunification process. By gathering testimony from each parent, the study captured their experiences as child welfare clients/parents. Many parents were fearful of a new accusation and the possibility of re-entry after case closure. The parents also described challenges, such as finding housing and maintaining the health benefits for their child(ren). Parents also had trouble focusing on the child-parent relationship, building a supportive network, and reducing the stress of life (Stephens et al., 2015). Thus, this research noted additional barriers to the reunification process that can help explain why a client or family re-enters the child welfare system or becomes a re-offender.

#### Successful Engagement Measurement

In addition to qualitative research on successful relational measurement (Jedwab et al. 2018), quantitative research has been conducted to address this issue. Yatchmenoff (2005) completed a quantitative study measuring five dimensions of engagement, noting that engaging difficult clients during child welfare cases has been a longstanding issue. In the study, participants were biological or adoptive parents who had an open dependency case. The goal was to identify whether these dimensions of engagement affected social workers' attempts to engage clients during the reunification process. In the study, Yatchmenoff surveyed "hard to engage clients," discovering five important dimensions of engagement within the client-social worker relationship: working relationship, trust, receptivity, investment, and expectancy. If not met, these

components presented a barrier between a client and their social worker during the engagement process. With the support of Yatchmenoff's five-factor model, the focus of the present research was to utilize these key components as a theoretical driving force to further examine relational influences.

### Literature Review Summary

The literature review summarized studies highlighting the importance of the relationship between social workers and their clients for important child welfare outcomes, such as family reunification. Failed reunification cases are a growing concern as the number of children in care increases and the reunification rate decreases. This information has inspired the present research examining relational factors that can result in failed reunifications. In summary, past work has identified relevant dimensions of engagement, which the present work builds on by including a current, third-party perspective from parent mentors, rather than clients or social workers.

### Theory Guiding Conceptualization

The present research utilized Yatchmenoff's five-factor model as a theoretical framework for examining relational influences using a qualitative design. Yatchmenoff's findings provided a foundation for conceptualizing the study and its structure, particularly regarding the five dimensions of engagement. The five dimensions, working relationship, trust, receptivity, investment, and

expectancy, are relevant for understanding the relational engagement process and have been found to be associated with important child welfare outcomes.

### Working Relationship

A working relationship is defined as the ideal relationship between a social worker and their client. In the present study, the researcher gathered data regarding the characteristics of an ideal relationship and their associations with reunification outcomes. The working relationship encompasses the entire set of dimensions in characterizing the ideal characteristics (Yatchmenoff, 2005).

### Trust vs. Mistrust

The dimension of trust is defined as the client's ability to feel as though they are in a safe and trusted relationship throughout the process. The present research captured factors that resulted in mistrust of or inability to trust the social worker. For trust to exist, Yatchmenoff noted that the client must believe the social worker's actions will match their statements. Trust is an important part of the relationship, which can also affect other dimensions. Exploring this area allowed the researcher to gather crucial data regarding the association between trust and reunification outcomes.

### Receptivity

Receptivity is defined as the social worker's ability to acknowledge the change occurring (rehabilitation) and the client's ability to apply these behavioral methods in their life. Receptivity is similar to the investment dimension (below). However, receptivity requires a client to not only be invested in the process but

also to be receptive to the rehabilitation process and to possess a willingness to change. Receptivity addresses the client's ability to take ownership of their actions and their ability to receive the rehabilitation required to reunify with their child(ren). In other words, this comprises their ability to comply with the requests of the assigned agency and to successfully apply these adjustments behaviorally (Yatchmenoff, 2005).

### Investment

Investment is defined as the client's ability to be cooperative and invested during the reunification process; the client's ability and willingness to rehabilitate. This dimension is affected by the parent's ability to absorb the curriculum. Clients must be invested, cooperative, and receptive to benefit from the rehabilitation process (Yatchmenoff, 2005). To assess investment separately from reception, the researcher also examined social worker's investment influences. Thus, the present work also utilized the investment dimension to examine the balance between both social workers and client.

### Expectancy

Expectancy describes a client's belief systems concerning their relations with the agency or social worker during the reunification case (Yatchmenoff, 2005). This dimension explores the clients' initial expectations or thoughts regarding the process as well as their beliefs throughout the reunification case. The present study further examined perception of the client's hopes and beliefs

by assessing their confidence in the systematic process leading to reunification and their confidence that their child(ren) could return to their care.

The present study incorporated these dimensions into the research questionnaire. Each interview question was related to a dimensional aspect. Thus, Yatchmenoff's five-factor model has provided structure to the study and supported the researcher's development of an organized set of interview questions (see Appendix C). In turn, this has helped identify relational influences that have strengthened the literature (Alexander & Charles, 2009; Bagdoniene & Jakstaite, 2009; Marc et al. 2019).

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

The present research has the potential to improve child welfare practice. This is important, as higher reunification rates result in fewer children in care. Author Loudonback (2018) notes that California allocates \$31 million of their budget to support foster parents with childcare, which is small. These funds do not cover children's healthcare costs, supportive services, foster parent payments, or social worker salary or benefit considerations. The state has generated millions of dollars for foster children and client (parent) services to reduce child maltreatment, to rehabilitate parents/families, and to reunify families. Unfortunately, the investment has not increased reunification rates resulting in fewer children in care. The decline in reunification rates continues to pose a threat to the state's budget, among other concerns (Fishman et al., 2019).

On a macro level, having fewer children in care can generate funds to be disbursed across many different systems. On a micro level, lower caseloads and a reduction in employment costs can allow workers to spend more time with their clients and deliver a high quality of care.

The fiscal impact of growing care needs could compromise any state's financial strengths. However, focusing on the solutions for this problem can have a significant impact on all parties, from state and federal agencies to clients, families, and children. Thus, the present research asked participants to provide crucial information regarding a client's ability to successfully reunify. Utilizing this close, third-party perspective can improve modern social work practices today.

### Summary

In summary, Chapter One defined the focus of the research and discussed the relationship between a social worker and his or her client. In particular this review examined the positive or negative influence of relational dimensions on child welfare case outcomes, such as successful reunification. This work highlights the positive impact client-social worker relationships may have on the reunification outcome. The present research used a qualitative design to assess the five-dimensional components described by Yatchmenoff (2005). The literature review provided information about prior work, which discussed the importance of family reunification and CWS case exits, social worker and client's perspectives, ideal relational characteristics, and successful



quantitative measurement. This provided a theoretical framework for the present research and noted potential contributions to macro and micro practice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ENGAGEMENT

#### Introduction

Chapter Two describes the details of the study, as well as strategies used to engaged the gatekeepers, and challenges surrounding diversity, ethics, and politics.

#### Study Site

The participants were employed at a confidential child welfare agency within the geographical region of Southern California. The data collection process took place at the agency's onsite and offsite locations as requested by the participants during the interview initiation. The government agency has several state-funded departments and assists the community in a variety of ways. However, the specific department and site location utilized for this research study was a child welfare department or agency. According to Morris (2014), the post-positive paradigm structure requires the study site to be in a naturalistic setting outside of a professional climate. The interview location for four participants took place onsite in a visitation room. The remaining three interview locations took place offsite in a public setting. These areas were described by the participants as comforting and convenient locations. The researcher's goal was to capture participants' human experience. To this end, the researcher tried to help the

participants feel as comfortable and safe as possible, to gather their true and honest experiences or perspectives. So, the researcher gave the participants the power to choose the location of their interview.

According to the participants, the agency encourages employees to utilize truthful personal experiences and opinions to improve their ability to relate to the client, as described by interviewees 1 and 3.

The United States Department of Human and Health Services (USDHHS, 2019) defines a child welfare professional as an individual who works with children, adolescents, and families from a variety of backgrounds. The communities they serve have their own set of unique challenges, needs, and strengths. Child welfare professionals are referred to as social workers throughout this study.

The department serves an array of clients and a diverse population. On any given day, a child welfare social worker from the agency will encounter families of a variety of races, ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic statuses, ages, religions, and disabilities. The agency covers many geographic areas over more than 20,000 square miles, with three primary regions comprising valley, mountain, and desert locations that house 24 cities/towns and areas close to state borders (San Bernardino County District Attorney, 2011). These areas cover a large, diverse population, and the district attorney's office reviews nearly 8,000 cases a month, with a total county population of 2,128,133. Participants covered a variety of geographical locations in all three regions, but for

confidentiality, the researcher has chosen not to identify the geographical region each participant managed.

### Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Site

The study took place in Southern California. The participants were chosen out of convenience geographically and professionally. The study proposal was submitted to the human subjects' board before engaging the gatekeepers.

The researcher did not formally engage the gatekeepers or notify the officials of the agency, as the interviews took place outside of the agency's operating hours and participants' paid time. Thus, formal written permission to conduct the study on or offsite was not requested. However, the researcher elected to notify the participants (interviewees), participants' supervisor (gatekeeper), participants' manager (gatekeeper), and the researcher's advisor of these terms. All parties were informed about the research and were told that participants could not be financially compensated by their agency for the interview time.

The researcher chose to engage the participants and gatekeepers via email. The email notification described the focus of the research study and its goal. In addition to examining the five engagement dimensions (Yatchmenoff, 2005), participants were advised that the study would assess whether the client and social worker relationship positively or negatively impacted case outcomes. The researcher ensured the gatekeeper's transparency throughout the study. For

this reason, the researcher included the research approval application, approved consent form, research questionnaire, and demographic information within the email. The gatekeepers responded to the email, providing full access to the participants and permission to conduct the study outside of financially compensated hours. The supervisor also sent out a mass email to all participants helping the researcher through the recruitment process. After receiving the agency's assistance, the researcher began to schedule interviews with the participants according to their availability and preferences.

### Self-Preparation

According to Morris (2014), the post-positivist approach requires that all self-preparation steps be completed before the study is conducted. Therefore, the researcher developed the research focus and prepared for the interviews before executing them. Within the context of the client- social worker relationship, the researcher identified an appropriate theoretical framework and gathered relevant literature for review. Based on the five dimensions of client-social worker relationships (Yatchmenoff, 2005), the researcher developed open-ended questions with the help of an educational advisor.

In order to detect similarities across participant interviews, the researcher developed a coding system for responses. The researcher also located a tool to accurately record participant conversations. Once these tasks were completed,

the researcher emailed notification of the proposed study to the gatekeepers and interviewees. This initiated participant recruitment, scheduling, and interviewing.

### Diversity Issues

The researcher did not have access to detailed demographical information about the participants before the commencement of this study. The researcher obtained this information from participants' demographic questionnaires and documented it in Appendix A, Table 1. The researcher enclosed a voluntary statement with the request to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). With the respect of the participants, all participants opted to remain anonymous, and the researcher upheld their request for anonymity when completing the questionnaire. It is possible that the participants had different sexual orientations or gender-conforming identifications. This study did not survey sexual preference, as these specifications were not a focus of the study. It is important to note that some employees may feel that demographics can influence case outcomes. However, this study was only designed to examine the five dimensions of the client-social worker relationship and not additional demographic information. The researcher upheld the participant's rights and did not discriminate against any participant.

## Addressing Ethical Issues

A copy of the research study proposal and goal was presented to the agency, agency participants, and human subjects review board. The researcher maintained transparency with these parties by accurately describing the research. The researcher obtained permission from the participants (see Informed Consent in Appendix D) and the human subjects board before execution (see Appendix F). No parties were made to feel forced to complete interviews or participate in the research study in any way. The researcher gauged the interviewee's level of comfortability throughout the interview and advised the interviewee that he or she had the option to terminate the interview at any time after commencement.

The participants were provided a depiction of research questions, process, and election form before scheduling the interview. This allowed the participants to opt out of the study and to provide them with a clear understanding of the research focus. The participants were notified of the purpose of the research study on the main page of consent and confidentiality was ensured. The researcher's main goal was to maintain participant autonomy throughout the study.

The participants were parent mentors within the agency. In this capacity, they served as mentors to current child welfare clients/parents who were navigating the dependency court system. The participants also supported agency

social workers during the reunification process, facilitating communication between parties (personal communication, interviewee 1, 2019).

To protect participants from retaliation and to encourage them to answer questions honestly, the researcher protected their identity and ensured their information was in a locked file. The researcher did not address the participants by their names during the recording process. Participants may have been former clients within the agency and their assigned social workers may or may not be employed within the agency. The researcher did not require the participants to reveal their previously assigned social worker's name or any other identifying information.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Email communication was utilized to notify the agency during the initial engagement phase. Telephone and email communication were utilized to follow-up with the agency and to contact participants. The researcher contacted the participants by phone and email to schedule an interview and designate a location. However, the main form of communication during the study was email. Once the participant scheduled the interview, the researcher documented the date/time/location in a personal planner. The researcher documented the interview by hand and via recording device. The recording device was equipped with software to note the entire contents of the interview accurately. The researcher also utilized handwritten notes to record keywords captured during



the interview. The researcher retrieved the contents of the interview from the recording device and used the recordings to transcribe the data. After the interviews, participants were debriefed (see Appendix E).

The researcher analyzed the data utilizing Microsoft Word. The researcher coded and annotated the text after converting the interviews into a Word document. The researcher also utilized that software's storage features. The researcher designated their educational email, with a confidential login and password for research purposes and daily educational operations. The method was selected to safeguard the study's electronic files and to store and locate correspondences easily. Electronic files included email correspondences with the gatekeepers (agency supervisor) and participants, software device documents, and research thesis documents. The researcher deleted all electronic contents when the project was closed. Overall, the electronic mail and the web-based Word application were the primary sources of communication with the agency and documentation.

### Summary

In summary, Chapter Two described the research site and engagement strategies, noting that the researcher allowed participants to select their interview locations. Before engagement, the researcher prepared for this study by developing a research focus, determining the theoretical framework, assessing the literature, and developing interview questions. The researcher considered the

possibility of ethical, diversity, and political issues related to the study.

Furthermore, the chapter explained the technology that was utilized throughout the research project for documentation and correspondence.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IMPLEMENTATION

#### Introduction

The implementation chapter describes the research participants, data collection process, and data analysis plan. The chapter closes with details on study termination, as well as strategies that were used to follow-up with the participants and to address data outcomes and analysis.

#### Study Participants

The participants for this study were former child welfare clients who were hired by the agency to serve as parent mentors to current child welfare clientele. This mentorship position helps to addresses barriers that parents face during the reunification process. Thus, the participants could provide a valuable perspective on the client-social worker relationship, as they worked closely with both parties and observed exchanges between them. This perspective allowed them to assess the five dimensions of a client-social work relationships. The researcher obtained the participants' demographic traits, such as age, race, marital status, number of years served in the position, and level of education. The participants' demographic information is presented in Appendix A, Table 1.

Data from the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health (2019) was used to better understand the demographics of the agency's clientele. The

organization provided statistics on foster care entry rates by demographic category for the region in which the agency is located from 2013-2015. African American children entered foster care at a rate of 9.2 individuals per 1,000 children. American Indian and Alaska Native children entered foster care at a rate of 4.2 individuals per 1,000 children. Asian/Pacific Islander children entered foster care at a rate of 1.0 individual per 1,000 children. Hispanic and Latino children entered foster care at the rate of 3.1 individuals per 1,000 children, and Caucasian children entered foster care at the rate of 4.8 individuals per 1,000 children. The child population is largely comprised of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian children according to the data, though these statistics may have changed since 2015.

### Selection of Participants

The subjects were easily accessible to the researcher and were employed by the same agency. Participants held the title of parent partner. The researcher attempted to engage another agency located in Southern California, but the agency did not respond to the request in the time allotted for research study. Thus, the researcher was able to assess seven participants within one agency. The researcher did not need to utilize the snowball method or otherwise recruit additional participants.

Participants served as parent mentors or partners for the duration of a client's case. The position was designed as a resource for current child welfare

system parents. According to participant 7, clients are either self-referred or referred by their social worker for the parent partner assignments. As mentors, the parents meet the clientele during their first interaction with the dependency court and conduct an orientation on that first court date, known as the detention hearing. The clients are required to attend an orientation as part of the dependency court introduction process. The orientation provides parents, with directions and an in-depth explanation of the dependency case process. The employees (parent partners), were strategically selected by the agency to greet the parents on their first court date. This strategic plan ensures that clients are provided with a fair and honest explanation of the formal process in which they are required to participate. This also gives parents the opportunity to ask questions or request one-on-one assistance from parent partners (personal communication, interviewee 7, 2019).

Each parent partner works in a different region or geographical office location within the county. The clients are provided with business cards for all the parent partners in the absence of another parent partner. The parent partners are assigned daily duties, including contacting the clients assigned to the regional office. A social worker can also request a parent partner's assistance during the case plan by submitting an internal referral. The referral will be sent to a mass internal email inbox that notifies all parent partners and their supervisor. The supervisor will then formally assign a parent partner and log the parent partner as a support staff member in the California state recording system. This software is

called the Child Welfare System/ Case Management system. This system is monitored by the state to ensure that each client's services are formally recorded to allow local agencies to manage their cases effectively, to provide the state with allotted funding needs, to document demographic information, and to ensure compliance under California state law (personal communication, interviewee 7, 2019). During the case plan, the parent partners also witness client-social worker interactions. Thus, the researcher has carefully selected these participants based on convenience and their unique ability to provide a third-party perspective.

### Data Gathering

To align with post-positivist paradigm practices, the data were gathered using qualitative methods (Morris, 2014). The participants were each individually interviewed by the researcher, face-to-face. The researcher scheduled their interviews after receiving full consent and the interviewees selected a comfortable, convenient location to conduct the interview.

The researcher utilized 20 interview questions that inquired about the social worker-client relationship, with six questions assigned to the working relationship dimension (see Appendix C). The literature placed particular emphasis on the working relationship dimension, so the researcher created two additional questions to address it in greater depth. Three questions were assigned to the dimensions of trust and receptivity, similar to prior studies, such as Biestek (1957), Coady (1993), Farrah (2012), Jedwab et al. (2018), and

Proctor (1982). Prior studies also emphasized reciprocity and trust, such as Alexander and Charles (2009) and Marc et al. (2019, p. 378). The remaining eight questions were evenly divided between the investment and expectancy dimensions. Originally, each dimension was assigned four questions, but adjustments were made to account for emphasis placed on some dimensions in the literature (e.g., Proctor, 1982).

The researcher also developed a short demographic survey that all participants completed before the in-person interview. The participants were not required to answer the demographic questions, and they were all advised of these terms by the researcher. The researcher gathered these data in seven transactions before the data analysis.

The researcher developed and coded questions related to each assigned dimension. The working relationship code differentiated between desirable characteristics and undesirable characteristics of the relationship. Any statements or responses referencing mistrust incidents were coded for trust. Issues related to mistrust were coded as negative and elements related to trust were coded as positive. The investment code was used for descriptions of clients' and social workers' willingness and equal investment during the reunification process, differentiating between low and high investment having positive or negative influences on the case. Expectancy coding was related to all dimensions, coding disbelief as negative and belief and confidence as positive. The participants could also provide comments regarding their feelings or

personal experiences, client and social worker relational interactions they had witnessed, and any personal feedback they received from clients.

#### Pre-interviewing Statement

The following is a script that was provided to the participant before the interview process began:

You may stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable during the process. You do not have to answer questions. You may also decline to participate in this research study at any time prior, during, or after the interview. All answers will remain confidential, and your name or information will not be disclosed to any soliciting party. The interview will examine the five dimensions of a client-social worker relationship. The five dimensions are a working relationship, trust, receptivity, investment, and expectancy. Please focus on a specific case of interest, for the sake of clarity. It is important to select a case for which you witnessed a large majority of the interaction between both parties (client and social worker). Please feel free to discuss any questions regarding the study before the interview commences.

#### Phases of Data Collection

The researcher collected data in two-phases. Phase 1 took place in fall and winter 2019 and winter 2020. The researcher contacted the participant to schedule an interview and sent an email confirmation with the meeting time,



date, and location. The researcher obtained the data verbally, by interviewing the participants, and recorded the data via a recording device and handwritten notes. Once the interviews were recorded, the researcher transcribed and analyzed their contents.

### Data Recording

Data were recorded by the researcher using a recording device and software in conjunction with handwritten notes. The recording device was a cell phone with an application dedicated to recording audio, transcribing conversations, and converting the transcriptions into documents. Transcriptions were converted into Word documents that were sent to the researcher's designated email. The researcher's handwritten notes were placed in a physical envelope file dedicated to storing research data. After the interviews commenced, the researcher accurately recalled the responses by reading converted documented transcriptions and listening to the audio recordings.

### Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, the researcher conducted a Directed Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using the transcribed data documents. The text allowed the researcher to interactively code, search, and resize or split the contents of the interview. After data analysis, the researcher organized the findings into a narrative format (see Chapter Four).

### Communication of Findings, Termination, and Dissemination Plan

The findings were submitted by the researcher to the ScholarWorks website, which is hosted by the California State University San Bernardino library. The library categorized the findings as an MSW research study. The information is available for a new social workers entering child welfare and can provide social workers with a parent partner or third-party perspective regarding the client-social worker relationship. In addition to this perspective, parent partners also understand the impact of relational influences and the factors that result in negative or positive interactions with their clients. This is evident from results (see Chapter Four) demonstrating patterns in participants' responses regarding these topics. The researcher electronically delivered narrative findings to the participants. The email included a formal thank you letter to the participants and a summary of the research findings, noting that the study was completed. The researcher can provide the agency administrators and director (gatekeepers) with a duplicate copy upon request.

The researcher accessed these participants through convenience sampling. The researcher is familiar with the agency's practices and may work with the participants in the future. The researcher plans to maintain relationships with the study participants. Their advice and perspective is highly valued in the child welfare field, and they are an important resource for clientele.

## Summary

The implementation chapter described the research participants, who were a convenience sample of former child welfare clients and subsequently served as parent mentors to other child welfare clientele/parents. The qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The researcher began conducting the interviews after recruitment and consent. The researcher documented the interviews by hand and using an audio recording device. Two phases of data collection took place at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020. The chapter closed with a description of the researcher's selected method of study termination, in which participants received a formal thank you letter advising him or her of the results.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The present study explored the relationship between the social worker and their client, examining five dimensions that may influence clients' abilities to reunify. Unique and common themes were detected throughout the data. The following section provides an in-depth description of parent participants' third-party perspectives and a synopsis of their responses. Additionally, the section includes a detailed description of hypotheses regarding how these themes positively or negatively affected the client's ability to reunify.

#### Sample Description

The seven participants were interviewed individually, face-to-face. Before each interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that asked about age, gender, racial profile, marital status, education level, employment status, and language preferences. Participants were also given a copy of the interview questions before the interview.

The demographic composition of the sample is described in Appendix A, Table 1. Four of the participants (57%) were between the ages of 35-44 and three participants (43%) were between the ages of 45-54 years old. All seven participants identified as female. Four of the seven participants (57%) were

Hispanic, and three participants were Caucasian (42%). Regarding education, five participants had some college credit, with no degree. One participant had some high school, with no diploma. The final participant had a high school graduate diploma or equivalent degree. All seven participants were employed by the agency, with the same job and duty description.

Participants had a wide range of experience as parent mentors. Two participants had been mentors for less than a year, two had been mentors for 5-10 years, one had served as a parent mentor for 1 year, another had served as a mentor for 2 years, and the last participant had served as a parent mentor for 4 years. Four participants were single and had never married, while three participants were married or were in a domestic partnership.

Candidates were all dependency court parent mentors who had personal, relatable experience as mentors and had previously had their children detained. The seven participants described a variety of different experiences within the child welfare department. Importantly, the participants related to their clients on a personal and professional level, as they used their personal experience as testimony in the recovery and reunification process. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, with emphasis on describing or providing examples to support their response and to gather a wider range of information.

## Qualitative Results

### Parent Partner Third-Party Perspective

A variety of themes arose from the parent partner interviews, which are described in this section. For the sake of clarity, the researcher examined each dimension separately.

Working Relationship. The parent partners were asked to describe the characteristics of an ideal working relationship between clients and social workers. All participants emphasized the importance of communication and transparency. The participants noted that clients initially entering reunification are confused, un-guided/misguided, and have little to no contact with the agency's staff (social workers). However, all the participants suggested that failed communication and transparency are the result of the client's initial confusion. This leaves parents isolated at a critical point in the recovery process and cripples their ability to regain (reunify) custody of their children through the reunification process. The participants suggested that this confusion and inability to communicate with their assigned social worker has a direct effect on their understanding of the process and associated expectations, as well as their ability to reunify.

Quotes from three participants embody the need for clarity and frequent client communication. Participant 1 stated, "I know one of the biggest issues that I have with my parents and social workers is that they can't get ahold of the social worker." Participant 2 reiterated claims, stating, "I mean just with phone

calls, the biggest thing that I hear is, social workers not calling back. Just return their calls and that means everything to the parents.” Participant 3 further emphasized the theme, stating, “Because with those two things [communication and transparency]...you can work through pretty much anything. As long as the social worker is transparent with the parent and the parent is aware of exactly what's going on.”

These two characteristics, communication and transparency, were unanimously endorsed by participants. The participants stressed that the initial introduction into the reunification process is crucial. They suggested that, without these factors, the clients’ expectations may become unclear, impeding their ability to reunify and producing a negative outcome. The absence of communication and transparency can also leave clients confused and unable to navigate the system, which is often a difficult and stressful process. The participants also noted that clients’ initial confusion can affect the social worker's ability to bond, empathize, and build rapport going forward in the case. This may further impact the case during the reunification process, impeding the social worker's ability to identify the client’s true rehabilitation needs.

One participant’s quote provides a perfect example of how the loss of these two key characteristics, communication and transparency, can impact a case moving forward: “I feel that there needs to be complete transparency and total communication, they [social workers] are letting the parents know... okay, this is exactly what you have to do.”

Participants also noted that these two characteristics may be associated with parents re-offending or re-entering the child welfare system. Insufficient communication between the worker and client prevents the development of familiarity, leaving only a small window into the client's assessment. This small window could prevent the social worker from identifying the client's true rehabilitation focus. In turn, false reunification goals may result in the family re-entering the child welfare system.

Trust vs. Mistrust. The participants were asked a series of questions regarding the nature of a safe and trusted client-social worker relationship and whether this factor played a role in the client's ability to reunify. Trust was described in many ways. However, the participants unanimously agreed that a trusting relationship would positively affect the client's ability to rehabilitate at a high level. Trust leads to better rapport, allowing the worker to properly assess the client and make clear, honest, accurate, court recommendations. In turn, this provides the client and family with appropriate social justice and confidence in systematic rehabilitation.

The themes related to mistrust, which can influence a case negatively, were: inaccurate assessment, which was identified as "lying" or misrepresenting the client on a court report; inability to disclose crucial information to their social worker for their assessment; not following through on verbal agreements; and not disclosing information about their children. Several participants made statements explaining the negative impacts. Participant 1 stated, "I think that it's important for



them to be able to trust their social worker enough to disclose relapse information.” Participant 3 indicated that, “the ones that have a rocky relationship [no rapport] with their social worker probably don't trust that the social worker will give them a positive recommendation. Those are the ones who have awful court reports.” Participant 4 emphasized, “If a visitation packet hasn't gotten submitted, you [the social worker] need to tell [transparency] your client I haven't been able to submit that packet yet.” Participant 6 stated that the parent, “just wants to know how their children’s dentist appointment is... or if they were sick this week... or had to go to the doctor. Just because they had their children detained, does not mean that they don’t care.”

The parents unanimously identified trust as having a positive effect on the client’s ability to rehabilitate and reunify effectively. However, there were a variety of factors that may result in mistrust or may impede social workers’ abilities to build trust with the client. One significant catalyst for mistrust was the social worker’s assessment or misrepresentation (i.e., “lying”) on a court report. Similarly, a client’s inability to disclose crucial information (e.g., relapse, drug use) may prevent a social worker from performing an accurate, honest assessment.

Receptivity. The participants were asked questions regarding the client’s ability to remain receptive during the rehabilitation process and the relational effects that impact their ability to reunify with their children. The questions addressed clients’ abilities to acknowledge, accept, and change their negative

behaviors. All seven of the participants agreed that receptivity was a critical component for assessments. This information was especially important for recognizing and to documenting the client's progress in the court report. Positive influences on outcomes included the social worker's belief that the client was capable of rehabilitating and the client's ability to demonstrate behavioral change. In turn, this can help the social worker highlight their progress accurately in the court report.

Some participants emphasized that parent partners or social workers may just need to hear a few brief statements from the client to know he or she is receptive to change. For example, one participant noted:

I don't need to hear parents say I abused my kid. We are all aware of the abuse. I need to hear the parents say, I can learn some new parenting skills, and I can learn a new way to discipline.

Additionally, from a third-party perspective, if the client is not receptive, the social worker may spend less time with that client, believe that the client cannot change, and fail to recommend reunification. In a few instances, participants emphasized that receptivity may be a critical component in sexual abuse cases and a parent's ability to protect his or her child. Labeling parents who are not receptive as re-offenders may result from social workers that lack rapport with their client or have insufficient knowledge of receptivity. This may lead to a false perception of rehabilitation or failed reunification status.

One participant related receptivity to denial, or the inability to acknowledge and accept their behavior. In turn, this impeded the client's ability to rehabilitate:

We are going to end up back here and pray nothing deathly happens.

Because ultimately, they would just be jumping through the hoops to get their kids back, but they don't see anything wrong with their actions, to begin with. You don't change something if you don't see a problem with your behavior. You have to know what the abuse was...because if nothing changes...nothing changes

Investment. The participants were asked how social workers can increase their clients' investment during the reunification process. Questions also explored the possibility of an imbalanced investment between parties and positive or negative influences on case outcomes. Furthermore, the interview addressed the relational differences between cooperation and investment and its impacts on the client's case outcome.

The participants suggested that clients demonstrated high levels of investment if their achievements were acknowledged, documented and accurately reported to the court, and applauded consistently. They also suggested that client cooperation and investment depends on receiving services in a timely fashion. There was a variety of answers regarding the balance and imbalance structure between clients and social workers. However, all seven of the participants stated the clients should be held accountable and have the highest level of investment in their case plan. Additional positive attributes of

praise included increased client self-confidence, self-worth, and motivation to change, increasing the likelihood of rehabilitation and reunification. One participant recalled their personal experience and attributed their investment and motivation to praise and proper documentation of their achievements.

The following quote highlights the importance of praise:

I would call my social worker and say look I got my 30-day chip and then my 60 and 90. She [the assigned social worker] was really positive and really encouraged me. I mean for someone who has done drugs their whole life... Sobriety is huge! Yeah, because it was a big milestone, after being in my addiction for over 25 years.

Possible negative influences on the case were closely related to the prior themes regarding social worker's perceived inability to provide accurate assessments and recommendations to the court. These inaccurate assessments were seen as a misrepresentation of the client's rehabilitation progress, which in turn provided inaccurate recommendations to the court. If the social worker is not invested, he or she has not built rapport, thus impeding their ability to properly assess the client. Sometimes, the social worker does not know their client and cannot recall their achievements, largely due to insufficient knowledge of the case or the client. When a social worker is not invested in a case, he or she, cannot identify the true rehabilitation needs of the family. Additionally, the clients may exhibit reduced motivation and cooperation when services or referrals are not submitted in a timely fashion, in turn decreasing their investment. This theme

is also closely related to those uncovered in the trust dimension. Trust is lost between the client and social worker when agreements are not followed through, resulting in decreased client self-determination and self-esteem.

The participants noted that their clients often feel as though they are “just a number” or “just a checklist.” A participant quoted one of her clients, who said, “I brought my certificates to the office and my social worker didn't come out and see me.”

Clients may interpret negative occurrences as indication of inadequate client case investment or acknowledgment on the part of the social worker. For example, a social worker minimizing a client's progress in sobriety as “just 30 days” or “just 60 days” could negatively impact the relationship. Participants unanimously agreed that the clients expect to be praised for their achievements, with accurate representation in their family reunification court report. These factors can improve client investment and increase the likelihood of reunification.

Expectancy. The participants were asked questions regarding their clients' belief and hope systems regarding the reunification court case process. The participants also discussed additional reasons why their clients may or may not reunify and other relational factors that had not been identified throughout the interview process. The participants provided a variety of responses to the expectancy questions. Many participants answered the questions based on their personal feelings.

The following statements include beliefs and hopes that participants experienced through their interactions in the child welfare department.

Participant 2 stated, “I knew for sure they wanted to adopt my kids because they were the cutest kids in the world.” Participant 4 reiterated that message, by stating, “they’re [agency or social worker] being paid all this money for these babies and they’re stealing the community’s babies.” Participant 7 also stated, “Some parents have this idea that social workers get paid extra money to keep kids.”

A common theme within the expectancy dimension was that the client’s initial belief is often that they would *not* receive a fair and honest chance to rehabilitate. This belief was often explained using social injustice or the need to create industry work as motivation. Frequently, clients have a long list of tasks to complete while simultaneously trying to attend rehabilitation classes, therapy sessions, visitations with children, and court dates and attempting to secure employment and housing. In these instances, participants reported positive reunification outcomes resulting from a social worker’s utilization of his or her support staff, such as a parent partner.

In the event, that the social worker is unavailable to assist or relate to the client, a supportive staff member should be added onto the case as an additional support system for both parties (social worker and client). The parent partner can reassure the client that he or she will be available to assist the client throughout the reunification process. All of the participants expressed that this would

positively influence a client's reunification case. Access to supportive staff members and good communication with the client may increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. Similarly, reassuring the client that the agency wants to rehabilitate and reunify the family, rather than create industry work and profits is important.

Additional unforeseeable factors in a client's belief system may include the realization that children are thriving out of their care. The clients may feel as though they are inadequate and that their children are better out of their care. This is compounded by the reoccurring written court report, which reinforces that he or she is an "abuser" every 6 months, which results in shame, guilt, and low self-esteem. This directly affects their confidence as a parent, provider, and protector.

One participant's response fully encompasses these thoughts and themes by saying, ". . . just that guilt and shame that comes behind it [an allegation]. Especially when you see your kids thriving out of your care. That really makes you question; am I going to do a good job and keep them thriving?"

Other Reasons for Failed Reunification. The participants were also asked to outline other barriers or factors influencing case outcomes. The main themes uncovered in this portion were implicit bias, confusing industry jargon, and lack of resources/housing.

The participants noted that they have witnessed social workers exhibit bias, particularly for clients who are re-offenders, with statements like, "this is the

third baby this mother has had,” that reiterate the theme of doubting the client or not believing they are willing or ready to change. These biases were largely subjective, based on the social worker's definition of a “dirty house” or other judgments. Unfortunately, this reasoning does not consider other factors, such as poverty or family cultural practices.

Confusing jargon was also associated with a client's inability to understand the reunification process and complete the reunification case plan.

One of the participants recalled an incident from their personal experience citing:

It was too fast in court, I didn't understand what just happened, and I was too afraid to ask what happened [in the court ruling]. My attorney came out, yelled for my name... and talked to me for a few minutes in the hallway quickly.

One participant also added that when her children were detained, she lost everything, including housing, the same day. This highlights the fact that removing children from the home may disqualify parents from low-income housing programs and funding sources. This is particularly devastating, as some affordable housing waiting lists can take 3 to 5 years. Thus, this process may strip the client of their secured housing and funding source.

One participant gave a detailed example of how insufficient resources affected the client's ability to reunify:



Another element is resources or lack of resources. There could be a social worker going above and beyond and building that rapport. It is just that the client cannot secure housing or a place to live. One of the things that I always say, when I speak to the new social workers is, if you have a mom, who has five kids, and she's been on welfare. And you remove these five kids.... just think ahead, because now this mom is going to be homeless. So, let's get her on the list. Let's move these parts now so that they're already handled when this mom has done everything that she needs to do to get her babies back. Now it's that time to move the kids and for her to get her baby back.

### Research Hypothesis and Question Results

The research hypothesis was that a positive client-social worker relationship, in the presence of these five dimensions, would have a positive effect on reunification. This hypothesis was supported, as participants unanimously agreed that the five dimensions of engagement played a crucial role in their clients' abilities to reunify. From their third-party perspective, the participants felt that deficiency in any of these dimensions would severely impair the client's ability to rehabilitate and to reunify effectively long-term.

## Qualitative Data Summary Findings

Overall, the data supported the research hypothesis. The five dimensions of engagement, as identified by Yatchmenoff (2005), are crucial during the reunification process. The participants suggested that having a positive client-social worker relationship had a significant effect on clients' abilities to reunify with their children. From a third-party perspective, an ideal client worker relationship would have a high level of communication and transparency. These factors can help the parties build rapport, in turn helping the client to effectively navigate the reunification process and to understand the agency's expectations. Additionally, this rapport allows the social worker to better assess the family's underlying rehabilitative needs, providing the client with an accurate assessment and a fair judicial recommendation. Receptivity plays a role in recommendations for a case. This theme emphasized the importance of interaction, which allows the social worker to witness specific behavioral change. Without this interaction, the social worker is unable to provide an accurate assessment of their client's rehabilitation receptivity. Additionally, acknowledging the client's rehabilitative successes can boost his or her investment within the reunification process. However, the social worker must also be invested in assessing and tracking their client's progress to applaud them and document information accurately. These findings suggest that a client and social worker can navigate their belief systems through consistent, positive interaction, providing each party with a fair chance to build a relationship and become familiar with the process of reunification.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The following chapter discusses the qualitative research findings that were presented in Chapter Four. The researcher also addresses the research study's limitations and implications for social work practice.

#### Research Study Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine client-social worker relational dimensions, addressing how these dimensions may positively or negatively impact the case outcome. A central theme in the findings was the need for the client and social worker to interact consistently and to foster a positive working relationship. This positive relationship is built on foundational trust, receptivity, investment, and expectancy. Positive engagement through these dimensions can also help eliminate systematic barriers and offer a strategy to engage clients (Yatchmenoff, 2005).

The positive aspects of these dimensions can also serve as a motivating factor for clients. Based on expectancy theory, motivation is triggered when a person is aware of the reward neurologically. Participants stressed that clients exhibit increased sense of self and motivation when they receive praise. In light of the expectancy theory of motivation, it appears that the client views the praise,

neurologically, as their reward (Kohli et al., 2018). According to the participants, this reward improves client motivation and increases the likelihood of their participation. These cause and effect relationships are linked to an individual's motivation and the neurological influences on their behavior.

Each participant recalled different clients, spread across the geographical regions in which they served. Despite these differences, the relevant themes were identified by each participant. The positive and negative responses that clients discussed emphasized the need for these dimensions. For example, social workers can build trust with clients if they communicate consistently, follow through with case-related tasks, provide a fair and accurate assessment, build a positive working relationship, and try to genuinely understand the family's underlying issues or rehabilitation needs.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, an individual is triggered externally due to internal feelings or experiences. The psychotherapeutic approach dissects a client's symptoms, attributing them to psychosocial stresses, relationship problems, or difficulty coping in social environments. The National Association of Social Work (NASW) also highlighted that these tactics are used in the field and are clinically relevant. There is a level of relational trust and communication that is developed between a therapist or social worker and their client. Without this trust and a holistic view of the client, these professionals may be unable to identify the client's underlying issues or psychological behavioral effects. Through this perspective, the social worker may be able to understand the

origination of abusive behavior patterns (Thyer, 2017). This idea aligns with the responses provided by participants. The participants stressed the need to understand the clients true rehabilitative needs to avoid making inaccurate assessments that can lead to false reunification and possibly recidivism.

### Five Ways to Improve a Client-Worker Relationship

Discussion of each dimension is outlined separately in the following section.

Working Relationship. Building a working relationship or positive rapport with clients is an important concept in a number of foundational theories and practices within social work. A positive working relationship is associated with numerous benefits, including more precise communication. According to Abbe and Brandon (2014), research suggests that there are benefits to maintaining a good client working relationship during the initial engagement process and throughout the crisis intervention process. However, the researchers also cautioned practitioners to avoid the possibility of “over rapport,” which may lead the practitioner to self-disclose at an unprofessional level. Thus, social workers must be careful to balance this relationship. However, throughout the present study, participants emphasized the need for positive rapport to support the client-social worker relationship and to overcome many of the obstacles faced throughout the dependency process.

Proctor (1982) suggested that client-social worker interaction is the “soul” of the relationship. Developing a positive relationship can clarify many systematic

beliefs or processes. The benefits of positive relationship/rapport-building are present across many industries and can have a long-lasting effect on a professional's ability to treat or work with the client. The present findings support the need to build a long-lasting and positive relationship with a client. This relational bond lays the foundation for trust, cooperation, and investment, which in turn support the client's ability to rehabilitate and reunify successfully.

Trust vs. Mistrust. Honesty and transparency were also key themes found throughout participants' responses. For example, they suggested that mistrust develops when clients believe they were misrepresented in court reports, which clients viewed as "lying" or exaggerating the truth. However, the misrepresentation was often due to the social worker's knowledge of the client's case status being insufficient. Poor communication or investment can produce an inaccurate assessment. This ultimately leads to inaccurate court recommendations, which the client may view as "lying" or misrepresentation. This emphasizes the need for consistent interaction with clients to maintain knowledge of their rehabilitation status or familial needs, as noted in prior studies (e.g., Jedwab et al., 2018).

When a social worker fails to develop a good working relationship with his or her client, the practitioner must assess the client based on short conversations or written progress reports, which affects the worker's ability to bond and foster trust. In turn, the social worker may miss critical components of the client's full rehabilitation progress. According to Abbe and Brandon (2014), a client is more

likely to relate to the investigator and self-disclose during an investigation when the pair has an excellent relationship/rapport. Thus, self-disclosure may rely on the client's ability to feel safe and trusted. Additionally, the research indicated that self-disclosure on the social worker's behalf can provide a moment for the pair to bond and increase the client's comfort.

There were many factors that participants believed could affect the client-social worker relationship, but their responses suggest that trust and transparency have the greatest impact on that link. Without trust, clients were unable to bond, self-disclose, communicate effectively, or build genuine rapport. Once trust was broken, the relationship tended to fail, often due to how the client was portrayed in the court report or recommendations.

Receptivity. The receptivity dimension had a significant effect on clients' abilities to rehabilitate. Participants felt that social workers needed to know the client had made the behavioral adjustments, so that the social worker could return the child(ren) safely to the home without a high risk of reoccurrence. This issue was also discussed by Jedwab et al. (2018), who found that the family's willingness to rehabilitate was critical in assessing family reunification and determining whether the child would remain safe when returned to the parents. The client's ability and desire to apply the behavioral change has an important role in this determination, along with supportive services offered to the family.

Receptivity is necessary throughout the client engagement process. Farrell, Luján, Britner, Randall, and Goodrich (2012) discussed Yatchmenoff's

five dimensions, noting that receptivity is related to compliance, stating that, “Compliance, in turn, predicted significant reductions in recidivism” (p. 257). These findings were reflected in participants’ comments regarding returning to care and hoping that “nothing deathly happens” as a result of unchanged behavior. Overall, receptivity is an important aspect of rehabilitative progress assessment. Without knowledge of receptivity, social workers cannot accurately determine the risks of reunification.

Investment. The power of praise was emphasized throughout participants’ responses. The parent partners agreed that providing significant praise or acknowledgement would increase the client’s interest in rehabilitation. This acknowledgement can allow clients to feel a sense of achievement, which can improve motivation to change. The participants stressed that a social worker must also be invested and familiar with a case or client to make an appropriate assessment. Participants indicated that communication and acknowledgment of achievement would improve client’s self-esteem and sense of worth. Positive disclosure is not only necessary, but can also foster an empathic bond with the client. Similarly, Lynch, Newlands, and Forrester (2019) found that communicating in an empathetic manner is vital in child welfare settings. Social workers frequently face intense emotional situations. However, to a client or child initially encountering child welfare, these are extraordinarily intense experiences that should be acknowledged. It is essential to know how the client prefers to be



addressed or engaged with during these experiences, and practitioners should practice self-awareness regarding word choice in all communication.

Insufficient acknowledgement can cause the client to feel doubt and diminished self-worth. Participants highlighted the power of praise, but if the pair does not interact or build rapport, the opportunity for praise is reduced. Thus, positive interaction and communication continue to play a role in many professional relationships and can affect the client's investment in the process. However, Rabinovich and Morton (2017) suggested that, "certain types of praise (person-focused, generic, and ability-based) communicate that one's self-worth is contingent on successful performance" (p. 628). These findings align with the discussion of self-worth and successful rehabilitation efforts.

Expectancy. The community's perception of systematic rehabilitation in child welfare cases is negative. The participants stated that many of their clients and families believe the department's actions are designed to create industry demand. This reputation has long plagued the child welfare system. Participants suggested that some families may begin the client-worker relationship in this mindset due to rumors heard among parents and their own experiences. Similar reports have been made by other parents. Recently, several Minnesota parents banded together in a civil action lawsuit against their local child welfare agency, claiming that their children were wrongfully removed. The families felt that their standard form of discipline, such as a spanking, was viewed as severe physical abuse, which led to unlawful removal of their children (Serres, 2018). These

belief systems are influenced by perceptions of child welfare social workers in the community or media, which are often tinged with injustice. Although anecdotal in nature, this suggests that social workers must address these perceptions.

According to Quinn-Aziz (2017), the negative perception of social workers is not just present in the United States. The United Kingdom's attitude toward child welfare social workers is also harmful. Quinn-Aziz (2017) provided a set of skills that are necessary to defeat this negative reputation. To change this perception, the author suggested that social workers must create a real relationship with their clients. This includes building a relationship that is realistic and reciprocal. Without these components, social workers cannot identify the root of their clients' problems. In addition to asking the family to complete practical rehabilitative tasks, the social worker must listen and be open to new methods or approaches. This concept was reiterated throughout the study and may be at the core of many dimensional issues. All five engagement factors were associated with the client-social worker relationship, but trust and transparency were thought to have the strongest impact on that link. Without trust, the clients were unable to bond, self-disclose, communicate effectively, and build genuine rapport. Once trust in the relationship was broken, the relationship often failed. This failure tends to occur when clients are aware of a misrepresentation, usually on the first 6-month court review date. Ineffective deployment of these dimensions can inhibit client success. Thus, these five factors are essential for improving the client-worker relationship.

## Limitations

Although the present research can contribute to social work practice in general, it is important to address the limitations of the study. For example, this study is limited by the small sample size of seven participants who were all women, representing a female or maternal perspective. Also, participants worked in a large Southern California county, which may limit generalizability of the findings to rural or smaller counties. Another limitation was the researcher's inability to capture a sample representing diverse racial and ethnic groups or a variety of agencies, which may also affect generalizability.

## Recommendations for Social Work Practice Policy and Research

The present research has several implications and micro assumptions for the field of social work. Many suggestions addressed the negative systematic repercussions for clients when the engagement dimensions described in this work are absent. Thus, this research would be beneficial to new or seasoned social workers. Further training sessions or awareness flyers regarding client relationships would also be helpful. It is essential to understand what characteristics lead clients to believe that social workers are dishonest, uninterested, or uninvested. This work also suggests that clients who do not receive direct guidance or clarity regarding their case plans may be unable to meet the court's high expectations, as noted in prior research (D'Andrade &

Chambers, 2012). However, it is essential to note that, even if these dimensions are present, there are still additional barriers clients face during rehabilitation.

It is vital to the client's treatment process to keep a clear, consistent, and open line of communication. This allows clients to receive the guidance they need to rehabilitate. Based on the present results, the client-worker relationship plays a significant role in the client's ability to reunify. In particular, it is vital to maintain sufficient knowledge of the client's progress to deliver an accurate assessment resulting in a fair judicial recommendation.

The research findings also have macro-level repercussions. Participant responses suggested that several systematic barriers can harm a client's ability to reunify. For example, the participants noted that many clients believe that the agency removes children to create demand for the industry and that there is bias within the child welfare field. These are significant systematic issues that plague the child welfare field and may add to the community's negative perception of routine child welfare. Building a relationship that is reciprocal and realistic can diminish these beliefs.

Lastly, there are additional factors that may influence reunification. These factors must be addressed in future research to help clients successfully completed the reunification process, as reunification is vital to the child welfare field and the system. Exploring new tactics for practice and procedure is beneficial. According to participants, clients value acknowledgment of their behavioral changes. This acknowledgement conveys appropriate investment in

the social worker and the agency's efforts. Participants also noted that this recognition could improve motivation, self-worth, and self-confidence, which may increase the likelihood of successful reunification and rehabilitation.

### Conclusion

The present research examined the relational, dimensional influences of engagement on reunification and whether those dimensions had a positive or negative impact on case outcomes. The data for this study were gathered from seven parent partners who worked directly with child welfare parents and social work practitioners. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their perceptions of social worker-client interactions. The results of this study were similar to prior research, which has emphasized the importance of the client-worker relationship and noted potential barriers to successful reunification. The study found discrepancies in the way that social workers and clients viewed specific actions in light of trust, receptivity, investment, and beliefs (Yatchmenoff, 2005). The study also found that these dimensions may affect clients' abilities to reunify. Together, these findings highlight the importance of client-social worker engagement for helping families successfully complete rehabilitation and reunification.

APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1  
*Demographic characteristics of study sample*

Characteristic	N	(%)
Age		
35-44	4	57.1
45-54	3	42.9
Sex		
Male	0	
Female	7	
Race/Ethnicity		
African American/Black	0	
Caucasian/White	3	
Hispanic/Latino	4	
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	
Other	0	
Education		
Some high school no diploma	1	
High school diploma or equivalent (GED)	1	
Some college, no degree	5	
Marital Status		
Single never married	4	
Married or domestic partnership	3	
Widow, divorced, and separated	0	
Employment		
Less than 1 year	2	
1 year	1	
2 years	1	
3 years	0	
4 years	1	
5-10 years	2	
Language		
English	7	

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE



## Demographic Questionnaire

Marital Status: What is your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Age: What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

Gender: Do you identify as (check all that apply) 1:

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Different gender identity: \_\_\_\_\_

Employment: How many years, have you been, employed as a Parent Partner?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-20
- 20+
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Education: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- Less than high school
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree or higher

Race: How would you identify your race/ethnicity (check all that apply)?

- Caucasian
- African American
- Latino (any race)
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Language: What is the language you are most comfortable speaking?

- English
- Spanish
- Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
RESEARCH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## Research Interview Questions

### Working Relationship

1. What working relationship characteristics make up a successful working relationship between a social worker and a client?
2. Based on your experience, do these characteristics play a role in the positive or negative direction the case will go? Could you provide an example?
3. Is frequent communication important to have in a client social worker relationship? Why or why not?
4. Do you see other elements affecting the success of a working relationship between both parties? Please elaborate.
5. Do you believe having a positive or negative working relationship affects the case outcome? Why or why not?
6. Does a successful social work client relationship determine whether the parents reenter the child welfare system? Why or why not?

### Trust

7. Is it important for your client to feel as though they are in a safe trusted relationship with their social worker? Why or why not?
8. From your perspective, do you believe trust plays a role in the client's case ability to reunify? Why or why not?
9. Does trust positively or negatively affect the client's case? Why or why not?

### Receptivity

10. From your perspective, is it important for the social worker to know the client is receptive to change? Why or why not?
11. Does it affect the client's case negatively or positively when the social worker believes a client is willing to acknowledge or change their behaviors? Please elaborate.
12. Do you see a difference in your client's case outcome when they are receptive to the reunification process? Could you provide an example?

### Investment

13. What can a social worker do to increase a client's investment during a case plan? Can you provide an example?
14. From your perspective, does it make a difference in the client social worker relationship when a client is cooperating and invested in their case plan? Please explain?
15. In your position, do you see an equal amount of investment in the case plan from both the client and the social worker? Why or why not? Please explain?
16. From your opinion, does the balance or imbalance of the investment play a role in your clients' case outcomes? How so?

### Expectancy

17. From your perspective, do clients believe their children will return to their care?
18. How hopeful are clients in believing the social worker is going to give a positive or negative recommendation to the courts?
19. Do clients expect to receive a positive or negative response from their social worker when completing classes or reunification case plan?
20. Are there other reasons why clients believe he or she will not reunify or reunify with their children? Please explain.

Developed by Desiree Camielle Alfaro.

APPENDIX D  
INFORMED CONSENT

**INFORMED CONSENT:**

The study in which you are asked to participate in is designed to examine the relationship between a child welfare social worker and their client (Parent) during the family reunification process. The findings will determine whether a negative or positive relationship affected the reunification outcome. The study is being conducted by Desiree Alfaro, an MSW student under the supervision of Dr. James David Simon, professor and in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between a child welfare worker and their client. Determining whether the negative or positive influences affected the client's renunciation outcome negatively or positively.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants (Client/ Parent) will be asked a few questions pertaining to their experience as a client, in relation, to their social worker relationship. Participants will also be asked a small set of demographic questions.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

**DURATION:** It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the survey.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. James David Simon at 909-537-7224(email: james.simon@csusb.edu) or the school of social work.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the PFAU Library Scholar Works (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) at California State University, San Bernardino after December 2018.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

\_\_\_\_X\_\_\_\_\_  
Place an X mark here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT



**DEBRIEFING STATEMENT:**

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate a client's relationship with their social worker and the negative or positive impact on reunification. We are interested in learning of any other positive or negative variables which influenced your ability to reunify. In addition, we are also interested in any variables you suggest could positively or negatively affect child welfare parents today. This is to inform you that no deception is involved in this study.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. James David Simon, professor or The School of Social Work. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the Scholar Works database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) after September 2020.

APPENDIX F  
IRB APPROVAL

**CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO**  
**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK**  
***Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee***

Researcher(s): Desiree Alfaro

Proposal Title: The five dimensions of a client-worker relationship and the effects on the child welfare outcome

# SW1968

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

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Proposal is:

☒ X      Approved

☐      To be resubmitted with revisions listed below

☐      To be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

☐      Faculty and Investigator (Student) signature missing

☐      Missing informed consent ☐      Debriefing statement

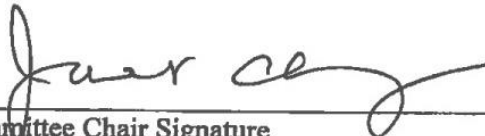
☐      Revisions needed in informed consent ☐      Debriefing

☐      Data collection instruments revision

☐      Agency approval letter missing

☐      CITI missing

☐      Revisions in design needed (specified below)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Chair Signature

6/19/2019  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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